

## *Daniel J. Boorstin, RIP*

Historian, Critic, and American Man of Books

The nation's collective IQ took a nosedive on February 28, 2004, when Daniel Joseph Boorstin—historian, professor, writer, curator, librarian, and great American booster—died of pneumonia at age 89. Boorstin was best known as a former Librarian of Congress and the author of two best-selling trilogies, one about early America (*The Americans*, 1958, 1965, 1973), and one about Western science, art, and philosophy (*The Discoverers*, 1983; *The Creators*, 1992; and *The Seekers*, 1998). These works of popular history, together with Boorstin's many other books and essays, combined vast knowledge, erudition, wit, and clarity, and were especially renowned for unexpected and illuminating insights on everyday life, particularly on the unforeseen significance of technological developments.

Born in Atlanta in 1914, and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Boorstin was quickly recognized as a prodigy, and entered Harvard University at age 15. From there he went to Oxford to study law, and earned the rare distinction of being called to the English bar as an American. Returning to Harvard, he was a lecturer in legal history,

and published his first book, *The Mysterious Science of the Law*, in 1941.

His interests turned from law to history, and in 1944 he began a 25-year stint as a member of the history faculty at the University of Chicago. Not formally trained in history, Boorstin was, in his own words, always an amateur—which, he reveled in pointing out, etymologically meant simply “a lover” of the practice. He sometimes seemed to get a special pleasure out of the disdain in which the professionals held him throughout his career.

While at Chicago, Boorstin's work focused mainly on early American history, and through a series of books (including his *Americans* trilogy) he pursued the thesis that America's political life was so peculiar and successful not because of its theories of government, but because the unique circumstances of American history and geography have made Americans inhospitable to abstract philosophy: a nation of pragmatists rather than ideologues, and yet a nation that understands its pragmatism as a theory. In his characteristically paradoxical style, Boorstin wrote that “the belief in the existence of an

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American theory has made a theory superfluous.” This idea, advanced in Boorstin’s underappreciated 1953 book *The Genius of American Politics*, put him at odds with the scholars of ideology who then dominated the academy, and earned him a reputation as a peculiar conservative iconoclast that would stay with him.

Boorstin’s boldest and most groundbreaking work was, however, not a history of early America but a piercing analysis of contemporary American self-delusion. *The Image*, published in 1961, was an effort to reveal the ways in which new technologies, combined with a traditional American craving for novelty and penchant for fantastical salesmanship, were increasingly distancing American life from reality. In the book, Boorstin introduced the term “pseudo-event” (an event, such as a press conference or “photo opportunity,” that exists purely for the purpose of being reported); he famously defined the celebrity as “a person who is well-known for his well-knownness”; and he sought to show, through historical narrative and telling anecdotes, what has been lost and what has been gained as news-making replaces news-gathering, celebrities replace heroes, tourists replace travelers, and images replace ideals. Boorstin’s comments on the first televised presidential debate (the Kennedy-Nixon debate, held the year before *The Image* was published) still ring as true in this election year as they did four decades ago:

“The drama of the situation was mostly specious, or at least had an extremely ambiguous relevance to the main (but forgotten) issue: which participant was better qualified for the presidency. Of course, a man’s ability, while standing under klieg lights, without notes, to answer in two and a half minutes a question kept secret until

that moment, had only the most dubious relevance—if any at all—to his real qualifications to make deliberate presidential decisions on long-standing public questions after being instructed by a corps of experts. The greatest presidents in our history (with the possible exception of F.D.R.) would have done miserably; but our most notorious demagogues would have shone. Pseudo-events thus lead to emphasis on pseudo-qualification.”

The character of television, Boorstin argued, reinforced the powerful American love of illusion, and the results were not always to be welcomed.

In this and other books, Boorstin made much of the ways in which new technologies and technological attitudes radically alter familiar ways of living in utterly unexpected ways, often for better, though sometimes for worse. In his books and numerous essays, Boorstin reflected on the meaning of science and technology for human life, past and present. In one essay, “The Republic of Technology and the Limits of Prophecy,” he describes some of the technological forces “that will shape our American lives” in the twenty-first century: Technology invents needs and exports problems; it creates momentum and is irreversible; it uproots and assimilates; it insulates and isolates. Will we be able, Boorstin wondered, “to share the exploring spirit, reach for the unknown, enjoy multiplying our wants, live in a world whose rhetoric is advertising, whose standard of living has become its morality—yet avoid the delusions of utopia and live a life within satisfying limits?”

Timepieces and telescopes, engines and electricity, statistics and space—no aspect of science and technology was beyond his ken. But Boorstin always argued that the book was in fact man’s greatest technical

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innovation, never surpassed. “The computer can help us find what we know is there,” he said in a speech at the dawn of the age of personal computers, “but the book remains our symbol and our resource for the unimagined question and the unwelcome answer.”

And Boorstin was always identified with books. His nomination by President Ford to be Librarian of Congress in 1975 was a natural choice, though professional librarians opposed him as—again—a mere amateur, and some liberals in Washington thought him too conservative. A more practical obstacle to his appointment, though, was the demand by several Senators that the prodigious Boorstin not do any of his own writing while he headed the Library of Congress. Boorstin refused, but promised to write only on his own time, and during his twelve years as Librarian of Congress he continued to write on weekends, in the evenings, and on nearly every weekday from 4 a.m. to 9 a.m., publishing several books and collections of essays.

His term at the Library of Congress was noted for its focus on modernizing and democratizing the library’s resources,

making them available to the public, and not just to members of Congress. Boorstin opened the library’s reading rooms and collections to all, and during his term the library began to host public events and act as a center of intellectual activity in Washington. He even ordered the majestic bronze doors of the library’s main building to be opened up. “They said it would create a draft,” Boorstin told reporters, “and I replied, ‘Great—that’s just what we need.’”

For six decades, Daniel J. Boorstin’s keen eye and sharp pen were just what America needed to understand the flow and meaning of its history, and to think about its future with a mind open to the unexpected. In *The Seekers*, his final book, he warned of the dangers of giving in to the modern technical outlook and forgetting to look upon the world with awe: “Western culture has turned from seeking the end or purpose to seeking causes—from the Why to the How. Might this empty meaning from our human experience?” It was an open question, and Boorstin’s own career offered hope that the answer did not have to be yes. He shall be missed.